

From McDiarmid's "Sketches from Nature."

GRETNNA MARRIAGES.

At what precise period the first runaway marriage was celebrated at the spot called Gretna-Green, cannot now be satisfactorily ascertained; but in common parlance the custom is said to have existed from time immemorial. Old Joseph Paisley, who died in 1814, at the advanced age of four-score years, resided in his youth at Megg's-hill, a small farm situated betwixt Gretna and Springfield; and hence the name of Gretna Green. But so far back as 1791, he abandoned Megg's-hill, and removed to Springfield as a more convenient spot, and though the popular name is still kept up, it is no longer geographically accurate. Though he generally went by the name of the *Blacksmith*, he knew nothing of the secrets of the anvil or the forge. On the contrary, he was bred a tobacconist, and continued to roll and liquor the seaman's quid, until the trade he had followed merely as a bye job, threw so surprisingly that he found he could subsist by it alone. *Welding*, or joining, is a term well known in the smithy; and it is believed that it was the metaphorical application of this term, that procured for Paisley the appellation of *blacksmith*. Though neither avaricious nor cold hearted, he was a rough, "out-spoken," eccentric fellow; drank like a fish, swore like a trooper, and when once in his cups, forgot entirely the character he had assumed. Still he monopolised the whole trade, and was only on one occasion threatened with opposition; but he soon put an end to his rival's pretensions, by proposing a copartnery, in which the assistant, in addition to the hope of a lucrative succession, was allowed to pocket the whole profits accruing from the visits of pedestrian couples. Repeatedly he earned the handsome fee of a hundred guineas, in a briefer space than a barber consumes in shaving a country bumpkin; old Charles B——, Lord Deerhurst, and one or two others, paid fully that sum; and though these were windfalls of rare occurrence, many of the inferior fees were so handsome, that the priest, had he been careful, might have lived merrily, and died in affluent or easy circumstances. But he liked his bottle too well for that; and the same remark, I understand, applies to his successors. What is easily come by, goes as cheaply, and the trade of marrying, though not as hazardous, has this feature in common with the trade of smuggling, that there is seldom much money gained by it in the end.

Until lately there were two rival practitioners at Springfield, one of whom married the granddaughter of Paisley, and fell heir to his trade, in much the same way that some persons acquire the right of vending quack medicines. Still the other gets a great deal of custom; and here, as in every thing else, competition has been favorable to the interest of the public. Though a bargain is generally made before hand, a marriage-monster who had no rival to fear, might fix his fee at any sum he pleased; and instances have occurred

in which the parties complained that they had been taxed too heavily. Not long before my visit to Springfield, a young English clergyman, whose father disapproved of the choice he had made, arrived for the purpose of being married. The fee demanded was thirty guineas, a demand to which his reverence demurred, and at the same time stated, that though he had married many a couple himself, his fee never exceeded half a guinea. The clergyman, in fact, had not so much money about him, but it was agreed at last that he should pay 10*l.* in hand, and grant a pro-missory note for the balance; and the bill, which was certainly a curiosity of its kind, was regularly negotiated through a Carlisle bank, and as regularly retired when it became due. At the time alluded to there were two rival inns, as well as rival priests, at Springfield, and the house at which a lover arrived, was regulated by the inn he started from at Carlisle. Though he might wish to give a preference, and issue positive orders on the subject, these orders were uniformly disobeyed. The post-boys would only stop at their favourite house, and that for the best of all reasons, that the priest went snacks with them, and knew full well the value of their patronage. Except in the case of sickness or absence, the *welders* never deserted their colours: all the guests of the one house were married by Mr. Laing; of the other by Mr. Elliott; so that those who were most deeply concerned, had very little to say in the business. In this way something like a monopoly existed and what is more strange still, not only the post-boy, who drove a couple, but the whole of his brethren about the inn were permitted to share in the profits of the day. Altogether the marrying business must bring a large sum annually into Springfield, and persons may be met with who confess without scruple, that it forms "the principal benefit and support of the place." Upon an average, three hundred couples are married in a year, and half a guinea is the lowest fee that is ever charged, even in the case of what are called poor and pedestrian couples. In September last one gentleman had given 40*l.*; and independently of the money that is spent in the inns, many hundreds annually must find their way into the pockets of the priests, and their concurrents, the post boys. In its legal effect, the ceremony of Gretna Green merely amounts to a confession before witnesses, that certain parties are man and wife; and the reader is aware that little more is required to constitute a marriage in Scotland — a marriage which may be censured by church courts, but which is perfectly binding in regard to property and the rights of children. Still a formula has a wonderful value in the eyes of the fair; and the priests, I believe, read a considerable part of the English marriage service, offer up a prayer, require the parties to join hands, sign a record, &c. &c. But on this part of their vo-

cation they prudently observe a strict silence; for, although the law cannot reach them at present, they could scarcely hope to escape punishment, were they openly to assume the character of persons. They also grant lines, of which the following is a literal copy:—"These are to certify to all whom it may concern, that —— and —— came before me, and declared themselves to be both single persons, and were lawfully married according to the way of the Church of England, and agreeably to the laws of the Kirk of Scotland. Given under my hand at Springfield, near Gretna Green, this —— day, &c., before these witnesses." At my request, Mr. Elliott produced the marriage record, which, as a public document, is regularly kept, and which, to confess the truth, would require to be correct, seeing that it is sometimes tendered as evidence in court. It is true they cannot subpoena a witness from Scotland, but the priest is of course allowed his expenses, and, as he himself remarked, "when a man knows that he goes in a good cause, why should he either be backward or afraid?"

A stranger who had leisure to rusticate about Springfield, tippling with the priests, and pumping the cronies and oracles of the village, might pick up many a queer story that would add to his stock of standing jokes, or peradventure eke out the well thumbed pages of the "Encyclopaedia of Wit," but as my time did not admit of this, I can only retail one or two.

Not long ago, a gentleman who had settled somewhere in Cumberland, arrived at Springfield, and spent an hour or two in one of the inns, chiefly, I believe, from motives of curiosity. He was accompanied by his daughter, a very beautiful and interesting creature, though not more than seventeen or eighteen years of age. As the parties had never crossed the Sark before, they were both more than ordinarily curious to know every thing about Scotland and Scotch marriages. In particular, they wished to see the *Blacksmith*, not doubting that a true son of Vulcan, with a begrimed face and leather apron, would pop in upon them and demand their pleasure. But here they were speedily undeceived; and when Mr. Elliott arrived, the gentleman endeavoured to be as witty as possible, stating, among other things, that he wished to introduce to him a young lady, who, at some future period, might have occasion for his services. To this salutation Mr. E. answered drily, that he had known as unlikely things come to pass; and in less than three or four months, the same young lady actually came before him, and was married to one of her father's ploughmen. In point of looks, the bridegroom and bride seemed formed for one another, and the jocular priest, who, from the first, recognised his old acquaintance, ventured to hint after dinner that surely Mr. —— would not be angry with his fair daughter for proving herself so apt a scholar, and profiting by the lesson he had himself taught. But alas! alas! the blow fell so heavily on the poor Cumbrian, that it at first threatened to break his heart, or unsettle his under-

standing. The lovely and light-hearted Beatrice was the apple of his eye, the stay and pride of his maturer years; and so far from wishing to match her with a common clown, there were few even of the better class of yeomen that he deemed worthy to aspire to such an honour. In the course of time, however, the old man's wrath gradually gave way to better feelings; a farm, taken for the son-in-law, was stocked and *plenished*, nobody knew how; and if report may be credited, the praiseworthy conduct of the young people led before long to a complete and permanent reconciliation.

On another occasion, a middle aged gentleman arrived from the south of England, and was united to a lady considerably his junior in years and appearance, and who, very unfortunately, happened to be the sister of his former wife. The veteran bridegroom was in high spirits, scattered his money freely, and seemed so well satisfied with the accommodation of the place, that he was in no haste to retire from the scene of his second nuptials. At length, however, the carriage was ordered to the door; and just as the sun was sinking to the west, the happy pair bade adieu to Springfield, and with a degree of haste, not at all requisite in their situation, made the best of their way to merry England. Nor had they left the inn above an hour or so, when a second chaise and four drove up, and discharged a fresh cargo of lovers, younger, fairer, and better matched, but neither so wealthy, nor so prodigal as the first. And whom, reader, might the second pair be?—whom but a handsome, well-favoured youth and the only daughter of the former bridegroom, who, in revenge for her father's frailty and folly, had yielded to the entreaties of an honest yeoman, that had wooed her long and loved her dearly.—On fair grounds, the lady had no objections whatever to a step-mother, but a step mother and an aunt in the same person formed a species of relationship utterly irreconcilable with her notions of propriety; and as she was determined to change her residence, at any rate, she thought it just as prudent to change her condition at the same time. On arriving at Carlisle, the father found a letter awaiting him at the inn, marked "in haste," and revealing to him the secret of his daughter's elopement; and not doubting that the parties had gone on the same errand as himself he immediately ordered fresh horses, and hurried back to Gretna Green. The carriages, in fact, must have met on the road, but the night being dark, neither party was aware of the circumstance; and though the Yorkshire proprietor reached Springfield before his daughter and her lover had departed, he was unfortunately a stage too late. Long and loudly he bragged and bullied, and fain would he have carried his daughter along with him; but to this the yeoman objected most stoutly, and when the other threatened to disinherit his child, he very coolly replied, "that he knew the value of a good wife, though without a guinea or a friend to take her part—that in a moderate way he could do his own turn, as well as the purse proud gentleman he was addressing—and that, as to the

rest, he would trust to Providence and his own industry." "Nobly spoken," roared the exhilarated priest, "and faith let me tell you, Sir, though the lines are now your own property, if you'll restore the bit of paper, I'll hand you every note, and wash my hands of the whole business." But to this condition the Yorkshireman demurred, and perceiving that matters could not be mended, he left the apartment and the village too, "growling all the while like a Russian bear."
